



This package provides information on Virginia's comprehensive reform of our public education system, grades kindergarten through 12.

Virginia's reform consists of four major elements:

1. Raising academic standards

✧ *The new "Standards of Learning" or "SOLs"*

2. Measuring student achievement and progress in the new, higher standards

✧ *Through the SOL tests*

3. Ensuring the accountability of schools for student achievement

✧ *Through the new Standards of Accreditation*

4. Communicating with parents, taxpayers, and the community at large

✧ *The new School Performance Report Card*



Raising Student Achievement Executive Summary

The Need to Raise Student Achievement

Virginia's comprehensive educational reform is being undertaken to address a serious problem that affects all of us, our schoolchildren and the future of our Commonwealth: the achievement levels of too many of Virginia's students in grades kindergarten through 12 are simply not adequate to compete successfully for the good, high-paying jobs in the international economy of the 21st century and fulfill their responsibilities as citizens of Virginia and the United States.

Information about Virginia's own Literacy Passport Test (LPT) indicates that nearly *one in three* sixth-graders does not pass all three content areas of the test at Grade 6. The failure rate has not improved since the LPT was first given in 1989, almost a decade ago. The Board of Education firmly believes that all students in Virginia, regardless of their background or where they live, deserve a quality education based on the same standards. Parents and taxpayers should easily be able to know how well schools are doing in meeting those standards.

Virginia's Reform Consists of Four Major Elements

To respond to the critical need to raise our students' achievement levels, Virginia initiated a sweeping reform of our K-12 education system in 1994. The reform is well under way, and consists of four major elements:

1. New, High Academic Standards, Known as the "Standards of Learning," or "SOLs"

The new SOLs were adopted by the Virginia Board of Education in June 1995, after a year-long development effort. They set forth minimum learning standards for every child from kindergarten through the 12th grade in the four major academic areas of English (which includes reading and writing), Math, Science, and History and Social Science (History, Geography, Civics, and Economics). Virginia's SOLs also incorporate computer technology learning standards, intended to result in computer literacy for *all* students *before* they enter high school.

Virginia's new SOLs have received national acclaim for their clarity, content, and measurability. Virginia is the *only* state to receive the American Federation of Teachers' *highest* rating in all four basic academic areas. More than 20 other states have used Virginia's SOLs as a model for their own standards to some degree or another.

2. Tests to Measure Student Progress in the New Standards of Learning

Following the adoption of the new SOLs by the Board of Education in 1995, the next step was to develop tests that would measure student progress towards learning the SOLs.

The development of these tests began in 1996, with the heavy involvement of classroom teachers, curriculum specialists, and local educators from throughout Virginia. A statewide field test of the new SOL test items took place in the spring of 1997. The first administration of the tests took place in the spring of 1998.

The SOL tests are given in English, Mathematics, Science and History and Social Science in grades 3, 5, and 8 and for certain high school courses. SOL tests are given in computer technology in grades 5 and 8.



3. Measures to Ensure Accountability for Student Achievement

In October 1997, the Virginia Board of Education adopted new Standards of Accreditation, or "SOA." The new SOA have one overriding goal: *to ensure accountability for student achievement in our public schools.*

Accountability is achieved in two primary ways.

First, students must pass a minimum number of high school SOL tests in order to receive a diploma, and a student's test results for grades 3, 5, and 8 must be considered in promotion decisions. These requirements address the problem of promoting students before they are academically ready and meet the demand of Virginia's business community that all high school graduates have demonstrated ability in essential skills such as reading, writing, and math.

Second, the state Board of Education believed it would not be fair to hold only a school's students accountable for student achievement; the school must also be held accountable to students, parents, taxpayers, and employers. So the new SOA require that a Virginia public school must have at least 70 percent of its students pass the applicable SOL tests in order for that school to retain its accreditation.

The required threshold is 50 percent on History and Social Science and Science tests in Grade 3. Schools with large numbers of transient students and/or students with limited English language proficiency may receive accommodations through the Board of Education.

In order to give students, parents, and schools time to adjust to the sweeping nature of the reform, the Virginia Board of Education decided to phase in these two important requirements:

- ✱ Passing the SOL tests will not become a graduation requirement for students until the Class of 2004.
- ✱ No individual school can lose its accreditation because of poor performance by its students on the SOL tests until the 2006-07 academic year.

4. Communication to Parents and the Community through a New School Performance Report Card

Students' performance on the SOL tests and the accreditation rating of every school will be communicated to parents and the community through an annual School Performance Report

Card. In addition to information on the academic performance of their child's school and local school division, the Virginia Report Card will provide information to parents on attendance rates, drop-out rates, and school safety.

After this year's initial phase-in (the first report cards will be provided in early 1999), the Report Card will be given annually to parents in the early fall around the beginning of the school year. It will enable parents, teachers, and school administrators to have a baseline against which progress in academic achievement may be measured.



Virginia's Reform Aligns Curriculum with Testing and Awards

Virginia seeks to improve student achievement by raising academic standards and requiring accountability for progress. All parts of our reform are linked together in a logical fashion.

As the following chart shows, Virginia has linked three key features of education:

- ✱ *What is taught* (the new SOLs),
- ✱ *What is measured* (progress in learning the new SOLs, as measured on the SOL tests)
- ✱ *What is awarded* (diplomas to students and accreditation to schools, both based on achievements on the SOL tests and requirements in the SOA).

Prior to this reform effort, there was no link among these key elements. By linking them, students are treated more fairly because they are tested on a consistent set of learning objectives. And it is fairer to schools as well, because expectations are clearly set forth, and every teacher in Virginia knows what minimum knowledge and

skills are expected to be taught to all students. Schools will be accredited based upon this shared set of expectations.

The Primary Goal is to Raise Student Achievement

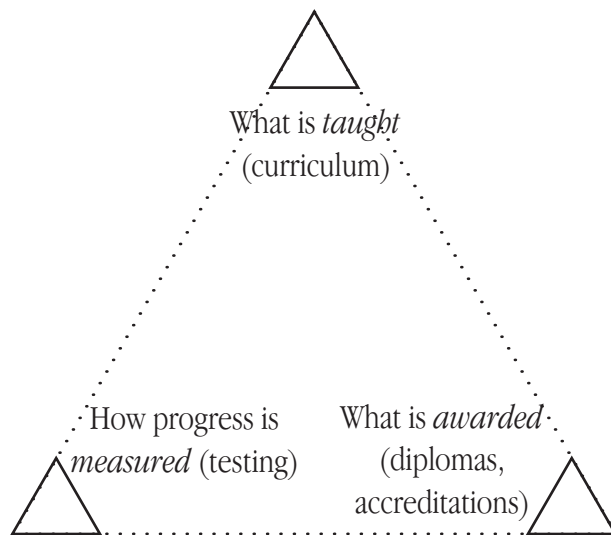
Virginia's sweeping reform is the product of years of work, and there are many years yet to go before it is fully in place. New academic standards and tests based on the Standards of Learning have been developed. New accreditation standards are being phased in gradually.

It will take several more years for all students to benefit from them fully. Yet all should remember that the reform has one primary, overriding goal: *to raise our students' academic achievement levels so they can be productive, successful, and responsible citizens of our Commonwealth and nation.*



Virginia's K-12 Education Reforms Will Link Higher Standards with Accountability

Before Virginia's new reforms, there was no statewide connection among the three main components of K-12 education:



No statewide link among the three components resulted in a lack of consistent accountability.

Now, under Virginia's new education reforms, all three components are linked for accountability:

